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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the speaking proficiency of advanced foreign language learners. It looks at performance on two different tasks: oral presentations and group discussions. Success in giving an oral presentation in front of an audience is assessed with the help of evaluations, which are then measured against various linguistic phenomena occurring in the presentations. The students' participation in the group discussions following the oral presentations is analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Finally, an attempt is made to see how well success in one task predicts success in the other task, in other words, whether active and dominant participants in a group discussion turn out to be good presenters. It is hoped that a close examination of students performance will eventually help in planning advanced courses in sociopragmatic skills. It also seems that students may have differences in the language-independent ability to solve metalinguistic problems such as these. (Author/VWL)

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ADVANCED FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN ACTION: A LOOK AT TWO SPEAKING TASKS

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This paper deals with the speaking proficiency of advanced foreign language learners. The focus is on performance in two different tasks: oral presentations and group discussions. Success in giving an oral presentation in front of an audience is assessed with the help of evaluations, which are then measured against various linguistic phenomena occurring in the presentations. The students' participation in the group discussions following the oral presentations is analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Finally, an attempt is made to see how well success in one task predicts success in the other task, in other words, whether active and dominant participants in a group discussion turn out to be good presenters. It is hoped that a close examination of student performance will eventually help us in planning advanced courses in sociopragmatic skills.

Keywords: oral proficiency, advanced learners

1 BACKGROUND

Speaking has traditionally occupied a minor role in foreign language instruction in Finland. Especially in the upper secondary school, with students aged 16 to 18, speaking has largely been neglected in language classes. The reason for this is that the matriculation examination that the students take at the end of upper secondary school has not included a test in speaking, and practically everything in language classes has been geared towards the matriculation examination. In other words, only those aspects of language proficiency that are tested in the final examination have been practised: grammar, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing – but not speaking. However, a change is under way: a speaking test is now going to be introduced into the final examination, and this will inevitably have a washback effect on teaching: speaking will be included in classroom activities as well. To some extent, this is already happening.

This article will describe a study in which the oral proficiency of advanced learners of English (many of them future language teachers) was analysed on the basis of two different speaking tasks: **oral presentations** and **group discussions**. The practical purpose of the study was to collect material

for course development in the English departments, bearing in mind the new challenges that foreign language teaching in Finnish schools is facing because of the increased importance of speaking skills.

The data for the research described here were gathered during a course called Oral Presentation, which was offered to second-year students in the English Department of the University of Turku. The course served two purposes at once: pedagogical and research purposes. The idea was to find out how well our second-year students speak English in different tasks: how they manage to give an oral presentation in front of an audience and what happens when they are engaged in a group discussion. It might be the case that somebody does very well in talking about a given topic to an audience, but the same person might feel rather uncomfortable in a group discussion. It goes without saying that the two tasks are rather different, as they represent two different functions of language use. Although both belong to the domain of spoken language, the function of oral presentations is essentially **transactional**. Group discussions are clearly **interactional** in nature and thus reflect the primary function of spoken language more strongly. According to Brown et al. (1984: 9), native speakers of English do not necessarily acquire both types of language use (transactional and interactional) with the same facility. It seems that the ability to chat is, indeed, an integral part of an individual's social skills, and teaching the interactional use of language would, therefore, not be necessary. The transactional function of spoken language, on the other hand, is something that even many native speakers would need help with (Brown et al. 1984: 15–16).

As far as speaking in a foreign language is concerned, it is possible that the ability to participate in interactional tasks develops to a great extent from the learner's native language experience, i.e. with the help of positive transfer. However, a large part of communicative behaviour has to be learned, either from exposure to the target language in a naturalistic environment or through explicit teaching. There are sociopragmatic differences between cultures, which the learner should be aware of, to avoid negative transfer. As Thomas (1983) has pointed out, the violation of pragmatic principles may sometimes be more disturbing than poor command of foreign language grammar or lexis; hence the term **pragmatic failure.** Whereas grammatical errors are usually considered to be natural and quite forgivable, pragmatic failure reflects badly on the learner as a person and can be the reason for national stereotypes (Thomas 1983: 96–97).

It is undoubtedly the case that a foreign language learner needs training in both types of spoken language use, transactional and interactional. For a discussion about the effects of explicit teaching of pragmatic skills, see House 1984, 1996.

2 SUBJECTS – UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

The subjects in this study were second-year students of English at the university. They had all had English for about ten years at school, and they had all passed a fairly hard entrance test before starting their English studies at the university, so they were all very competent, advanced English speakers. Their grammatical competence was pretty much alike; they had a similar kind of grammar-oriented school career behind them. However, it was to be expected that there would be differences in sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence – differences between individual students and differences between the two tasks.

There were 14 students in the class (13 female and 1 male student), but due to technical difficulties with the videotaping, only 12 oral presentations (11 by female students and one by a male student) were included in the analysis. The group discussions were recorded more successfully, with all 14 students included.

3 DATA COLLECTION: ORAL PRESENTATIONS & GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Each student gave a ten-minute presentation on a topic of his/her own choosing. The topics varied considerably; some talked about their own experiences (e.g. working or studying abroad), while others had chosen more formal themes, such as Australian Aborigines, body language, or the Canadian government. During the presentation, everybody else, i.e. the members of the audience, evaluated the presentation using a form which had been specially devised for this purpose. The form showed seven main criteria (and their various sub-categories) which should be taken into consideration when preparing, delivering and evaluating presentations. These criteria included **Contact with the audience**, **Organization and Structure**, **Content**, **Delivery**, **Visual aids**, **Communicativeness**, and **Language**, and they were suggested by the students themselves in a general discussion about oral presentations at the very beginning of the course. The evaluators were asked to rate these criteria using a scale from 'a lot to be desired' to 'superbly done' (0 to 4) and to give extra comments in their own words.

After each presentation, there were discussions in groups of three or four, with the presenter also participating in the discussion in his/her own group. The group discussions lasted about 4–5 minutes, and they were followed by a general class discussion, a viewing of a video extract of the presentation in question, and comments by the presenter and the members of the audience. All this took about 30 minutes, after which there was another oral presentation followed by the same kind of evaluation, discus-

sion, and analysis. All in all, there were three presentations delivered and evaluated during one class meeting. For research purposes, the presentations were videotaped and later transcribed and analysed; the group discussions were audiotaped, transcribed and analysed.

As far as the oral presentations were concerned, the evaluation forms were an important source of information. They could be compared with the results of a linguistic analysis of the presentations, and some conclusions could then be drawn about the impact of these various features on the way the presentations were received by the audience. And this again, it was hoped, would lead to some practical implications for future courses on oral presentations.

4 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The linguistic analysis of the oral presentations included a study of the **orality – literacy dimension**, i.e. various features that are typical either of the spoken or the written mode. These include **noun phrase complexity, sentence complexity, lexical density,** and **lexical variation.** The transcripts of the oral presentations were also analysed from another perspective, i.e. from the point of view of **discourse organization** (the use of various structural markers e.g. to introduce or to conclude sub-topics). In spite of the primarily transactional function of oral presentations, interactional aspects are also very important in a speech addressed to an audience. It is the responsibility of the speaker to make his/her presentation accessible by taking the audience into consideration in various ways. For a discussion about interactive features in presentations, see Thompson 1997.

The evaluations described in Chapter 3 served as a point of reference against which the results of the linguistic analysis were compared.

As far as the group discussions were concerned, they were also analysed in various ways, both qualitatively and quantitatively. It was assumed that the amount of participation is an indication of the student's relative ease with the task. In other words, it was assumed that those students who felt comfortable with discussing a topic in English also manifested the highest interactive competence. Of course, the sheer amount of participation alone is not enough to determine how competent a student is. Someone who only gives brief feedback signals (*yeah, uh-huh...*) has a great number of turns, but his/her overall contribution to the discussion is rather limited. So one has to combine quantity and quality to see how much a student actually contributes to the discussion.

The group discussions were a kind of a by-product of the course, because the focus was on the oral presentations. Conversational behaviour, turn-taking, interrupting, starting, closing conversations, holding the floor,

etc. were not discussed at all. So this was really authentic data: conversational behaviour as the students manifested it, without being trained at all. It was to be expected that the students drew from two main sources in their English conversations. First of all, they transferred part of their conversational practices from their native-language competence, and secondly, they used whatever skills they had acquired more or less subconsciously when interacting with English-speaking and other people. It has been suggested that foreign language learners do not always make efficient use of their communicative knowledge which is based on L1 experience, because they think that native-language procedures are not culturally suitable in the foreign language (Kasper 1989). Of course, sometimes first-language conversational features do not work in a foreign or second language context, and explicit teaching of turn-taking, topic nomination, openings, closings, and conversational gambits would probably be in order.

In this study, the amount of speech produced by each student in the group discussions was calculated in three ways:

1 - by counting the total number of words uttered by each student
2 - by counting the percentage of turns produced by each student
3 - by counting the average turn length for each student

In addition to this purely quantitative approach, a more qualitative measure was also applied by looking at what kinds of contributions each student provided. It is, of course, possible to produce a fair amount of language without actually saying very much, so this kind of closer scrutiny of the contents of each student's speech was considered necessary. Leo van Lier (1988) has developed a method for calculating a participation index for each of the participants in an interaction (applicable to classroom discourse and also to group discussions). He bases his analysis on turn-taking behaviour, which, according to him, is indicative of the degree of the learner's initiative (van Lier 1988: 122–123). The analysis of the present study also focused on student initiative, but it consisted of distinguishing five types of contributions (or turns): **initiations** (student introduced a new idea), **replies** (student answered a question addressed either to him/her personally or to the group), **echoes** (student agreed with another speaker; these may have included repetitions of another speaker's words, rephrasing another speaker's utterance, or other signals of agreement), **elaborations** (student reacted to another speaker's words by adding something, by giving a personal view, etc.), and **disagreements** (student disagreed with the previous speaker). This way, it was possible to say which students were actively responsible for the contents and the development of the conversation and which of them adopted a more passive role.

The question which follows from this design is how the amount and quality of participation in the group discussions relate to success in giving an oral presentation.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Oral presentations

Evaluations by the students and those by the teacher are discussed together, although it turned out that the students were generally slightly more lenient in their judgments than the teacher. On the whole, all presenters received rather good ratings from all evaluators, the total average of all grades given by the students and the teacher being 3.57 and 3.20, respectively, while the maximum grade was 4. The **Content** criterion was given the highest marks (3.73 on an average), which means that the presenters were able to convince their audience that they were experts in their topics. **Communicativeness** (3.07) and **Visual aids** (3.46) received the lowest marks from all evaluators. It is evident that these are aspects of public speaking which would have to be discussed more thoroughly on future courses of this kind.

As far as the individual students were concerned, they were all allotted rather good grades, the best average grade being 3.92 and the least good 3.14. Comparisons between the 'success' of the presentations and the various linguistic features were based on these evaluation averages (see Table 1.)

As far as the **linguistic analysis** is concerned, the oral presentations revealed quite a few interesting trends; there were also quite a few differences between individual speakers. On the whole, there is no clear pattern to show that typically literal features would be more characteristic of either good or bad presentations. They occurred in the best presentations and also in the poorest ones. Instead, it seemed that literacy features (including complex noun phrases, i.e. noun phrases with pre- and/or postmodifications, complex sentence structures, i.e. sentences with subordinate clauses, high lexical density, and high lexical variation) reflected different things in the speech of the best presenters compared with the less good ones. In the speech of the best presenters (i.e. those judged to be the best on the basis of the evaluations) they appeared to reflect ease, competence and experience, whereas in the poorer presentations, they were probably the result of the fact that the speaker had relied heavily on his or her written text.

Noun phrase complexity (i.e. noun phrases with premodifiers or postmodifiers, or with both) is generally a more frequent characteristic of written language than spoken language. Complex noun phrases are particularly common in scientific and technical texts because they are so concise; they contain plenty of information in a compact form. They are generally

less common in speech. On an average, the oral presentations of the present study fell between prose fiction and serious talk and writing in native English, as far as the number of complex NPs was concerned (Quirk et al. 1985: 1351). About 70 % of all NPs in the present data were simple and about 30 % complex. But it is important to remember that there was much variation between the students. The average percentage of complex noun phrases was 30, but between individual students the percentage varied from 13 to 52. The student with the greatest amount of complex noun phrases was evaluated as an average presenter, on the whole. The best presenter had about the average amount of noun phrase complexity, i.e. 30 %. The student who had the largest number of complex noun phrases also had a fair amount of multiple modification (premodifiers and postmodifiers in the same NP).

As far as **sentence complexity**, or the amount of subordination, is concerned, there, again, tends to be a difference between written and spoken language. Written language tends to have more subordinate clauses than speech. In the present data, the amount of complex sentences (or T-units) was around 25 %. What was surprising was that sentence complexity did not seem to characterize those presentations in which the speaker used her written text and simply read it aloud. Instead, those who spoke freely, without even looking at their notes, were the ones who had very long sentence structures with a great number of subordinate clauses (about 40–45 %). It seems that sentence complexity was here an indication of a general ease and competence to use the language, and perhaps also an indication of creativity which was going on while the speaker was delivering her presentation.

Lexical density (the proportion of content words in the total number of words) tends to be higher in written language than in speech. This is also related to the amount of advance preparation (Ure 1971). So here we had two elements at work: the amount of preparation and the reliance on (or independence of) the written version of the paper, i.e. whether the speaker was reading or speaking freely. The role of feedback is also important in determining the degree of lexical density. Interactive situations tend to generate speech with lower lexical density. Ure's (1971) findings have shown that in different speech situations, lexical density varies from about 24 % to over 40 %. The highest lexical density (around 40 %) was found e.g. in an extract from a lecture. In oral presentations, there is usually very little verbal feedback, so their lexical density figures can be expected to be fairly high.

In the present data, the percentage of lexical density of the oral presentations varied from 45 % to 59 %, while the average was about 50 %. These figures seem rather high compared with Ure's studies, but the result is not surprising, given the fact that these were prepared talks and many students relied on their written texts quite considerably.

Lexical variation (the type – token ratio of content words) indicates the amount of repetition in a text, or richness of vocabulary. To avoid the difficulty of differing text lengths (as the type – token ratio is dependent on the length of the text), special formulae have been developed to calculate this ratio. The formula used here was a modified version of the so-called Guiraud's index, i.e. the total number of content word types was divided by the square root of twice the number of content word tokens (see e.g. Håkansson 1987).

Lexical variation tends to be higher in writing than in speech. In this study, those students who read their paper had higher lexical density and higher lexical variation than those who spoke freely. Those who spoke freely had more repetition in their speech. Also their topics were more relaxed and personal and required less specialized vocabulary.

Table 1 summarizes the orality/literacy features found in the oral presentations. The students are listed from the best down to the least good (based on the evaluations). Those presentations with an above-average value for each of the four literacy features are marked with an X. The NP complexity value here stands for multiple modification (pre- and postmodification in the same NP).

TABLE 1. Literacy features in the oral presentations.

Student	NP complexity (multiple mod.)	Sentence complexity	Lexical density	Lexical variation
I	X	X		X
VIII		X		
IX			X	
V		X	X	X
VI				X
VII	X		X	X
XI				
X		X		
III		X		
IV	X		X	X
XII	X		X	
II				

As pointed out earlier, there was no clear pattern to show that features typically connected with written texts would be more characteristic of either good or bad presentations. In the case of the best presentations, they seemed to reflect ease, competence, and experience, whereas in the poorer presentations, they appeared to be the result of reliance on the written text. Student I, who was evaluated as the best presenter and who spoke without reading, produced quite a few sentences with several subordinate clauses, such as

> *Now before we go any deeper into the subject of body language – I would like to say a couple of words on communication - because very often when we talk about communication the first thing that comes into your mind – or into my mind anyway – are the words.*

Student XI was the only one with no literacy features at all. She spoke without reading and used the simplest language. As Table 1 shows, she was evaluated as an average presenter among the students in this class.

An examination of the various **discourse features** occurring in the oral presentations showed that there were clear differences between the best and the least good speeches. The presentations that received the best evaluations generally contained more structural markers and other facilitating devices than the poorer ones. In other words, the best presentations tended to have a clear introduction, where the topic was put in context (e.g. by explaining why the topic was relevant or interesting), and also a clear conclusion (usually a summary). Moreover, they contained a large number of structural markers (*Now – to go deeper into cultural aspects..., So to conclude with..., etc.)* to indicate transitions from one sub-topic to the next. The video recordings also showed that those who got the best evaluations spoke rather freely, without reading.

5.2 Group discussions

5.2.1 Amount of participation

The students divided themselves into four groups of three or four at the beginning of the course. As mentioned earlier, the presenter took part in the discussion in his/her own group, thus getting immediate feedback from the others.

When considering the amount of student participation in the group discussions, each group had to be analysed separately. This was because every group was a unit in its own right, with its own dynamics, and the participation of each student depended, to a great extent, on the atmosphere of his/her particular group.

Each group seemed to have a student who clearly dominated the discussion, at least as far as the quantity of speech is concerned. In every group, one student produced more than half of all the words uttered in the conversations. These 'dominating' students also produced most of the turns in each group, and their turns were longer than those produced by the other students (Appendix 1).

5.2.2 Quality of participation

The nature of student participation was examined by dividing all turns into five categories and calculating how many of each of these turn types were produced by each student. The turn types are the following:

Initiations	(the student introduces a new idea, i.e. initiates a topic or topic change)
Replies	(the student answers a question)
Echoes	(the student agrees with another speaker)
Elaborations	(the student reacts to another speaker's words by adding some thing, by giving a personal view, etc.)
Disagreements	(the student disagrees with the previous speaker)

Examples of the above turn types can be seen in the following short extracts:

Extract I:
Student 1: *Well I – I really liked her English.* **(init.)**
Student 2: *Yeah me too.* **(echo)**
Student 3: *Yes – good English – very nice English.* **(echo)**
Student 1: *Very nice. It was a treat to listen.* **(echo)**
Student 4: *Hmmm – yeah it was – er – yeah really.* **(echo)**
Student 1: *It was a treat to listen.* **(echo)**
Student 4: *Pleasure to your ears.* **(echo)**
Student 1: *And– she seemed so confident and relaxed.* **(init.)**
Student 2: *Hmmm – very calm.* **(elab.)**
Student 1: *I think she – she would make a – er – perfect – tour mai– tour maid or what are those – tour hostess – in Toronto – – like –* **(elab.)**
Student 2: *Guides.* **(elab.)**
Student 4: *Yeah she really gave the impression that she knew what she was talking about.* **(init.)**

Extract II:
Student 1: *Well we're already being recorded. Everybody hear each other?* **(init.)**
Student 2: *Hmmmm. Yes.* **(reply)**
Student 3: *I think so too.* **(echo)**

Extract III:
Student 1: *... I spoke too fast.* **(init.)**
Student 2: *No you didn't.* **(disagr.)**

Disagreements were extremely rare in the data; there were only 10 instances of them (0.3 % of all turns).

It turned out that in three out of the four groups, it was the same student who was the most talkative and who also initiated most of the topics. The dominance of this one student in each group was rather clear; well over half of the topics were initiated by her (53 % in Group 1, 62 % in Group 2, 61 % in Group 3). In the fourth group, the student who produced the greatest number of words only initiated less than a third of the topics, and another student, who spoke much less, produced most of the initiations.

To get a more complete picture of each student's participation in the discussions, the figures for **initiations** and **elaborations** were combined (Appendix 2). It turned out that it was indeed the same student in each group who both spoke more than the others and contributed most to the actual contents of the conversations.

5.2.3 The two tasks compared

The purpose of this study was also to find out how the two tasks, oral presentations and group discussions, compare in terms of student performance, in other words, how each student performs in these two tasks. How does participation in group discussions relate to oral presentation skills? Are the dominant students also the best public speakers?

In Group 1, the dominant speaker was, indeed, a student who was evaluated very positively in the oral presentation evaluations. It was the best presenter of all, student number I. In her group, she was responsible for 53 % of initiations and for 42 % of initiations and elaborations counted together. However, in Group 2, the dominant student was student number II, who was evaluated as the poorest presenter.

In the other two groups, the dominant students were regarded as average public speakers. However, they were both very confident and relaxed speakers, who, according to their own reports, had had a lot of experience with talking in English. So their presentations were very free and relaxed and would probably have been graded higher, if they had chosen a slightly more formal approach.

All in all, it seems that active and resourceful participation in a group discussion does not necessarily mean that you do especially well in an oral presentation, and success in giving an oral presentation does not guarantee skillful and natural participation in a group discussion. Different tasks obviously require different things from learners. What is more, some of this fluctuation is probably due to personality and cultural differences. However, there is no doubt that awareness of various sociopragmatic rules and conventions pertaining to language use in various speech situations would benefit

foreign language learners, even in the case of advanced, highly competent ones as the students in the present study. The comparison between the two performances (success in the two tasks) in this study relied heavily on subjective evaluations. However, it seems that the results point to the same direction as those reported by Thompson (1997), i.e. it seems that when planning and conducting courses on oral presentation, it would be advisable to concentrate on the various organizational features of presentations, which would emphasize the interactional aspect of public speaking by taking the needs of the audience into consideration.

6 CONCLUSION

Speaking in a foreign language is a complex activity. In addition to grammatical and lexical skills, it involves knowledge of various sociolinguistic and pragmatic principles and practices. Moreover, each learner is equipped with a certain individual background; personality and cultural factors inevitably play a role in foreign language performance. The influence of the native language is often discernible, either as a helping factor or even as a possible source of misunderstandings.

The study described in this article addresses a number of questions concerning advanced foreign language competence, specifically oral proficiency as it is manifested in two different speaking tasks, oral presentations and group discussions. The main finding of the the study is the fact that success in one type of task does not necessarily predict success in another type of task. Increased awareness of various speaking conventions (pertaining to public speaking and conversational behaviour) together with increased opportunities to practise these modes of speaking would certainly be beneficial to advanced learners.

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APPENDIX 1.

TABLE 2. Number of words and turns and turn length (in words) produced by students in Group 1.

Student	Words	Words %	Turns	Turns %	Turn length
I	3544	47.5 %	319	32.5 %	11.1
IV	563	7.5 %	190	19.2 %	3.0
V	1432	19.2 %	211	21.5 %	6.8
VII	1926	25.8 %	263	26.8 %	7.3
Total	7465	100 %	983	100 %	

TABLE 3. Number of words and turns and turn length (in words) produced by students in Group 2.

Student	Words	Words %	Turns	Turns %	Turn length
II	1538	42.7 %	206	37.0 %	7.5
VIII	674	18.7 %	129	23.2 %	5.2
XII	738	20.4 %	116	20.8 %	6.4
XIII	655	18.2 %	106	19.0 %	6.2
Total	3605	100 %	557	100 %	

TABLE 4. Number of words and turns and turn length (in words) produced by students in Group 3.

Student	Words	Words %	Turns	Turns %	Turn length
III	1887	30.1 %	284	35.1 %	6.6
VI	1002	16.0 %	205	25.4 %	4.9
XI	3382	53.9 %	319	39.5 %	10.6
Total	6271	100 %	808	100 %	

TABLE 5. Number of words and turns and turn length (in words) produced by students in Group 4.

Student	Words	Words %	Turns	Turns %	Turn length
IX	951	13.1 %	174	21.5 %	5.5 %
X	1899	26.1 %	303	37.4 %	6.3 %
XIV	4427	60.8 %	333	41.1 %	13.3 %
Total	7277	100 %	810	100 %	

APPENDIX 2.

TABLE 6. Number of Initiations and Elaborations produced by students in Group 1.

STUDENT	Initiations+Elaborations	Init+Elab %
I	203	42.2 %
IV	55	11.6 %
V	88	18.3 %
VII	134	27.9 %
Total	480	100 %

Table 7. Number of Initiations and Elaborations produced by students in Group 2.

Student	Initiations+Elaborations	Init+Elab %
II	111	38.0 %
VIII	64	21.9 %
XII	62	21.3 %
XIII	55	18.8 %
Total	292	100 %

TABLE 8. Number of Initiations and Elaborations produced by students in Group 3.

Student	Initiations+Elaborations	Init+Elab %
III	107	26.8 %
VI	54	13.4 %
XI	239	59.8 %
Total	400	100 %

TABLE 9. Number of Initiations and Elaborations produced by students in Group 4.

Student	Initiations+Elaborations	Init+Elab %
IX	70	12.6 %
X	157	28.2 %
XIV	329	59.2 %
Total	556	100 %